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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001146

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: JAMAAT-E-ISLAMI: THE TORTOISE NOT THE HARE

REF: DHAKA 1122

Classified By: Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i., Nicholas Dean. R
easons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Bangladesh's largest religious party, Jamaat-e-Islami held its closed-door Majlish-e-Shura December 7-9 and decided not to change course, despite extraordinary losses in the December 2008 elections and efforts by the current Awami League government to marginalize Jamaat. Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed was re-elected Jamaat's Secretary General, and six out of seven of its Assistant Secretaries General and three of its five Nayeab-e-Ameers were also re-elected. While Jamaat focuses on long-term goals, Chatra Shabbir, Jamaat's student wing, continues to immerse itself in political clashes.

JAMAAT FOCUSED ON LONG-TERM GOALS

2. (C) Prior to the majlish, Jamaat-e-Islami Assistant Secretary General Abdur Razzaq contrasted Jamaat's intentions with those of Bangladesh's two main political parties, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Razzaq told us Jamaat is not concerned with short-term gains like winning the next national election or increasing the number of seats in the national parliament. Rather, Jamaat's true aim is to make Bangladesh a genuinely Islamic country.

3. (C) Muhammad Kararuzzaman, Jamaat's Assistant Secretary General for International Affairs, echoed Razzaq's views. He stressed that the majlish should not be thought of as the equivalent to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's Council, which took place on the same dates (reftel), or an American-style political convention. Yes, he said, there would be a number of elections for positions within the party and the Nizam would announce the names for appointed positions, but the meeting would focus more on Islam and how to connect with the people of Bangladesh.

MAJLISH STRESSES IDEOLOGY

4. (C) Jamaat Assistant Secretary General Abdul Quader Mollah told us following the majlish that the gathering had been more about teaching than politics. He claimed that what differentiated Jamaat from the other two major political parties was that Jamaat had an ideology and the other parties did not. According to Jamaat leaders, the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party formed positions that varied election-by-election depending on what they think would garner votes, while Jamaat focused on its end goal. Mollah

said Jamaat leaders used the majlish to advise delegates, who came from every district in Bangladesh, about ways to effectively convey Jamaat messages.

15. (C) Mollah repeatedly said an Islamic state was the only thing that could solve the problems of Bangladesh, including poverty and moral bankruptcy. He said he was not worried about electoral losses or parliamentary intrigue; an ideological movement needed time to grow. (Note: Mollah also claimed that Bangladesh's Jamaat had no ties with and received no money, official or unofficial, from the Jamaat-e-Islami parties of other countries. However, he was well-versed on Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami and claimed its former leader, Maulana Fazur Rehman, as a friend. End Note.)

STUDENT WING FOCUSED ON CAMPUS AND POLITICS

16. (C) Jamaat's student wing, Bangladesh Islami Chatra Shabbir, in contrast, is much more focused on the short-term. The Shabbir leadership is concentrating on politics -- both on campus and nationally. It has organized protests against the Awami League government's education policies and holds workshops to promote Islam among students. Shabbir members also spend much of their time clashing with the student wings of the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party. In a meeting with a Political Officer, Shabbir leaders were intent on showing him picture after picture of fights Shabbir members have had with other parties on campuses throughout the country and the injuries suffered, they claimed, unjustly. There was no mention of injuries inflicted.

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17. (C) Shabbir leaders said their budget was funded solely by nominal contributions from its membership and alumni, but the high-rent location of Shabbir's headquarters belies this claim. Faculty members at Dhaka University allege that Shabbir, as well as the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party's student wings, regularly shake-down area business for money. Like the other student parties, Shabbir serves as a feeder-organization to Jamaat.

COMMENT

18. (C) Jamaat's closed-door majlish and our meetings with Jamaat and Shabbir indicate that the organizations remain hierarchical with top-down decision making, despite their claims that they are internally democratic. Jamaat's leaders clearly hope that slow and steady wins the race. Mission Dhaka will continue to engage with Jamaat and Shabbir and track their efforts to transform Bangladesh into a more Islamic state.
Dean